

Standards of Excellence: Managing an EFL Department

By Susan Chenard

Eight basic principles of management are put forth by Peters and Waterman in their national bestseller *In Search of Excellence* (1982). These *principles* are based on a theory that has stood the scientific test of time and apply to the management of EFL departments as well as the world of corporate business. In gathering material for their book, the authors talked extensively with executives around the world who were known for their skill, experience, and wisdom on the question of organizational design; and they visited a dozen business schools in the USA and Europe.

Two theorists from academia, Karl Weick of Cornell and James March of Stanford, were cited by Peters and Waterman as the exemplars on the theory of management. Weick says that organizations learn and adapt very slowly. They continue obsolete, habitual internal procedures "long after their practical value has lost meaning."

I am reminded of how our language department required us to record student grades in our registers, on record cards, and on three different computer printouts. Why? Because we always did it that way. EFL departments that get rid of obsolete administrative and academic practices will free themselves to try out new productive ways that will improve their academic and administrative environment.

Weick believes that:

Chronic use of the military metaphor leads people repeatedly to overlook a different kind of organization, one that values improvisation rather than forecasting, dwells on opportunities rather than constraints, discovers new actions rather than defends past actions, values arguments more highly than serenity and encourages doubt and contradiction rather than belief.

March depicts organizational learning and decision-making as streams of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities interacting almost randomly to bring the organization forward. It is critical that EFL departments stay open-minded, creative, and experimental. Keeping positive attitudes toward change can revitalize the department and foster productive improvements.

This article will discuss in detail how the eight principles identified by Peters and Waterman can be directly applied to the management of an EFL department. It will begin by defining excellence in order to generalize about what excellent EFL departments can do to outshine other departments. I will draw upon specific examples from my management experience as chairperson of the English Language Center at King Abdul Aziz University that may assist managers of other EFL programs to successfully accomplish their management objectives.

Why Organize?

For EFL departments, the answer includes the following:

- to become more effective language teachers;
- to take advantage of the current methods of teaching, testing, and curriculum design;
- to develop new programs, materials, and services;
- to permanently improve personnel relations;
- to build cooperative relations with client colleges and administrators;
- to build expertise in an area in which the department is not yet involved;
- to respond to changes in the academic and administrative environment.

Peters and Waterman see this last item-the ability to respond to any sort of environmental change-as definitive to excellent management.

An EFL department must insist on excellence. It must keep things simple. It must respond to the students and the faculty. It must listen to the teachers and treat them like adults. It must allow teachers time to analyze and innovate. while tolerating a degree of chaos in return for regular experimentation and fast action.

The research by Peters and Waterman suggests that an intelligent approach to organizing must include at least seven variables: structure, strategy, people, management style, systems and procedures, guiding concepts and shared values (i.e., culture), and the current and projected strengths and skills of the organizational entity. This article will explore how these variables within the eight basic principles relate to an EFL department.

Let's now review the principles to see how they can apply to the management of EFL departments:

1. A bias for action-A preference for doing something rather than sending a question through cycles of analyses and committee reports.

Whenever a problem arises, EFL departments should address it immediately. Standard operating procedure in excellent organizations is "Do it; fix it; try it." The recommendation is to allow staff members to test out new ideas on the students and learn from the results. Many practical ideas will be generated by staff members working in real situations.

A bottom-up management style is recommended. Ideas for change in our department are generated from the bottom and then are evaluated and managed at the top. Our department coordinators serve as line managers to directly supervise how things are going. One example of a problem that we had to deal with was increased enrollment and the need to increase the size of our classes. As a result of the greater numbers, the material had to be modified to suit teaching a larger group. The program coordinator experimented with the material, cutting out certain parts and supplementing others, and then testing results until the program worked well once again.

Our staff members are from all over the world (Egypt, USA, Philippines, Somalia, India, Pakistan, and Canada), including both native and non-native speakers, with different qualifications and experience. Collectively they offer a wide and varied perspective on how problems can be resolved. They take into consideration the traditional background of the Saudi Arabian students and their learning preferences. The solutions they generate are based on theoretical research, as well as on practical experience. Therefore, the solutions are derived out of a need for a unique customized solution.

Murphy (1990) makes a strong case for bottom-up innovation. He states that innovation generated by the teachers gives them a sense of ownership; consequently they will implement these changes much more readily than innovations imposed from the top. In the process of allowing teachers to create solutions, they grow professionally.

2. Staying close to the students-learning their preferences and catering to them. EFL departments must stay close to the students. Peters and Waterman state that excellent organizations "listen intently and regularly." Satisfied students should be the rule, not the exception. Feedback from students and staff members must be carefully considered and acted on. My office door is always open at the Center, and students feel safe coming into my office and speaking frankly about their needs and concerns. I know that when I keep hearing the same problem from different students in different classes, the problem is real and must be resolved.

Student questionnaires at the end of the semester as well as surveys given anytime during the course can be helpful in keeping administrators abreast of current attitudes and needs. They help to identify material and exercises that are useless or outdated. They also let you know when students become bored with material that has been used for too many semesters.

As changes occur in Saudi elementary and secondary schools, freshmen classes present new challenges to our staff members. Increased efforts in English language training effect the level of knowledge the students possess when they enroll. We are also affected by newer generations of Saudi students who travel abroad and have interests that are global rather than local. Other changes have come from the surplus of satellite dishes that are now being used by Saudi families. Satellite transmissions and cable TV have made it possible for most citizens to be eye-witnesses of world events; and as a result, our English curriculum must now reflect an awareness of global issues.

3. Autonomy and entrepreneurship-breaking the department into small functional units and encouraging them to think independently and competitively.

In our department "autonomy and entrepreneurship" translate into allowing program coordinators to operate independently and competitively. For example, the coordinator of the first year science ESP program operates independently from the second year science ESP program coordinator, and both coordinators work feverishly to generate new ideas and methodologies for teaching, testing, and assessing the curriculum. Practical risk-taking is encouraged. As a result, there is a continuous generation of learning materials and new tests. Ideas that work are repeated and the ones that don't work are filed for possible use in another situation.

4. Productivity through people-creating in all employees the awareness that their best efforts are essential and that they will share in the rewards of the department's success.

Reinforcing positive action with verbal and written rewards, and eliminating negative efforts with direct constructive criticism will produce excellent results. Unlike private institutions, public institutions cannot provide profit sharing or bonuses to staff members; however, formal recognition in departmental memos and end-of-the-year reports, lunch outings, and thank-you cards can also be satisfying to those staff members who have put out a lot of effort to improve a program or keep administrative problems in check.

Acknowledging the individual staff member who is ranked number one in the organization is a simple concept, but it occupies a major portion of management time. My colleagues have proven to me that if I create a working environment where it is safe for them to make mistakes and where their personal efforts will be recognized and directly rewarded, they will respond in kind exponentially. Respecting staff members' motivational needs requires sensitivity and willingness to shout praise out loud for some members and shake hands or nod approval to others.

5. Hands-on management-insisting that managers keep in touch with the department's essential business.

Excellent EFL managers can learn from their business counterparts at excellent organizations like IBM and Hewlett Packard. By regularly walking the hallways they can get firsthand information about what is going on, assessing student and staff punctuality, and the condition of resources. Observe teachers to get a "feel" for the class dynamics. Is it a happy, motivated classroom or a formal, structured classroom? Are the students eager to learn more or are they bored and uninterested? These are questions that can be answered easily by the manager simply being present on a periodic basis.

Be sure that classrooms are tidy, material is in supply and easily accessible, and that equipment is in good repair. Finding the office or the classroom in a state of disorder is psychologically disturbing to staff members and students. It's important for staff members to share in decorating their office and classroom space. Creating a pleasant teaching and working environment will positively affect student and staff morale. Simply hanging new posters and bringing a few small plants will go a long way in improving the physical environment. Make sure that the maintenance staff keeps the classroom dusted and vacuumed. Technicians must repair equipment and order spare parts promptly. Stock must be taken of supplies and teaching materials so everything is available when needed.

6. Stick to knitting-implementing the programs that the organization can do best. Another common feature of excellent organizations is doing what you do best and not straying into fields that are unfamiliar. Certainly within an EFL department, careful consideration of staff qualifications and abilities will determine what can and cannot be done. It is risky for a department with specialists in English and science to wander off into development of material for other faculties unless new personnel are recruited with an expertise in the targeted fields.

7. Simple form, lean staff-keeping few administrative layers, with few people at the upper levels. Staying lean is the rule. This feature is probably easily achieved in EFL departments where budgetary considerations do not allow for over-staffing. I suspect that most of us suffer from under-staffing rather than over-staffing. Sharing responsibilities and encouraging inter-departmental cooperation becomes an important feature of an excellent EFL department where under staffing puts everyone in need of last minute assistance to complete an assignment on time. We have kept strong relations with other departments by sharing responsibilities like proctoring exams, etc.

8. Simultaneous loose/tight properties-fostering a climate where there is dedication to the central values of the department combined with tolerance for all employees who accept those values. Peters and Waterman state that excellent organizations are "both centralized and decentralized." While autonomy is given to the employees, a few core values are centralized. These include a commitment to customizing the curriculum to meet the specific needs of the students and teaching with excellence. Staff members in excellent EFL departments will love what they do and the students whom they serve. You should be able "to feel" the intensity of the staff members' dedication to their work and the students.

Inquiry into excellent and innovative EFL department management practices should be a continuing effort of EFL administrators. The principles described in this article attempt to guide EFL managers to search for excellence. I hope these principles will help them to appreciate the importance of organizational management in improving the overall effectiveness of their programs.

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